

HABS
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Las Vegas City Hall (Las Vegas City Police
and Fire Department, Old City Hall)
626-6th St.
Las Vegas
San Miquel County
New Mexico

HABS No. NM-99

P H O T O G R A P H S

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

APPLICATION: CITY HALL PROJECT

NAME: Las Vegas City Hall
Secondary names: Las Vegas City Police and Fire Department
Old City Hall

LOCATION: 626 - 6th Street
Las Vegas, New Mexico 87701

SE corner of the intersection of 6th Street and
University; structure faces 6th Street

Las Vegas, San Miguel County, New Mexico

PRESENT OWNER: City of Las Vegas
Mayor Steven R. Franken
P. O. Box 179
Las Vegas, New Mexico 87701

PRESENT OCCUPANTS: Las Vegas City Police
Police Chief Tom Gillespie and
Las Vegas Fire Department
Fire Chief Fred Yarger
P. O. Box 179
Las Vegas, New Mexico 87701

PRESENT USE: Las Vegas City Police headquarters
Las Vegas Fire Department

Significance:

Constructed between 1892 and 1896, this handsome stone building served first as town hall and fire department for the newly (1888) incorporated Town of East Las Vegas. Between 1893 and 1904 it additionally served as the community's first library when a reading room run by the Women's Christian Temperance Union opened in a corner room of the first floor. The principal city offices, those of the clerk and police chief, were located on the ground floor. Rooms were rented upstairs to the school board for use by the eighth grade class and public high school. That high school graduated its first and only class in 1898 and then moved to the newly opened Normal University.

The City Hall, a solidly built and well-designed Italianate Romanesque structure reflected the community's railroad-influenced Eastern styles and the local expertise of the Pettine Brother masons. It continued to serve Las Vegas as the headquarters of its police and fire departments.

Part 1. Historical Information

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: "City Hall 1892" carved stone title block

In April, 1891, the Town Trustees purchased a lot from George W. Ward, and called for a public referendum on an issue of municipal bonds amounting to \$7,000 for the building of a town hall. It carried (minutes of the Town Trustees, 1888 - 1894, City Manager's Office.)

Construction began in 1892. The Trustees found that \$7,000 would be inadequate and obtained approval for an issue of additional bonds up to \$10,000. A contract was let to William R. Williams. Soon, however, the contractor encountered financial difficulties. He turned over his payments from the town to his bondsmen, who then sought to pay up the claims of the laborers at five cents on the dollar, and the workmen went on a strike. The trustees then declared the first contract suspended and let one to John Neill for completion of the building. It was far enough along in 1893 for them to conduct the dedication ceremonies as the principal feature of the celebration of the Fourth of July. The open house and ceremony was climaxed at night by a banquet, speeches, and grand ball. On into 1895 and 1896, the municipality, by then incorporated as a City, continued to pay more bills for completion of work on parts of the interior.

2. Architect: Kirchner and Kirchner

The governing body approved the plans of the architects, Kirchner and Kirchner. According to Pen and Sunlight Sketches of St. Louis, 1891,

"Mr. H. W. Kirchner first commenced the practice of his profession in St. Louis in 1875. In 1882 he was joined by Mr. A. H. Kirchner. They have designed and superintended the construction of the following buildings, which are greatly admired for their stability, finish and workmanship, viz. Cotton Exchange, St. Louis ... City Hall, Las Vegas, New Mexico ..."

The article further notes that

"They have also a branch house in Denver, Colorado at 625 Mining Exchange building, which is controlled by Mr. H. W. Kirchner, while the St. Louis business is managed by Mr. A. H. Kirchner, who is a popular member of leading social and professional circles."

Additional references from the same article indicate that Kirchner and Kirchner designed several other structures in New Mexico, including the Courthouse in Santa Fe (burned down) the Courthouse in Mora (replaced), and the Insane Asylum in Las Vegas (partially intact?). An 1890 plan for the Mora Courthouse indicates a firm office in Trinidad, Colorado.

3. Builder, Contractor, Suppliers:

1st contractor: William R. Williams, 1892. Contract suspended when contractor encountered financial difficulties.

2nd contractor: John Neill; awarded a contract by Trustees to complete the project.

It seems likely that Pettine and Sons, Contractors, were the stone masons for the project. The purple sandstone used to trim the City Hall was associated with many of their projects in Las Vegas. This uniquely colored rock came from a quarry near Kearny's Gap, five miles south of Las Vegas.

Mike and John Pettine came to Santa Fe from Genoa, Italy in the 1880's to join the crew of French and Italian workmen finishing St. Francis's Cathedral. They worked on another Kirchner and Kirchner project in Santa Fe, the old State Capitol building (c. 1891), then set up their business in Las Vegas.

Mrs. Sally Mackein of Las Vegas, who is the daughter of Mike Pettine, has stated in a recent interview that City Hall was a product of the Pettine masons. Certainly the skilled workmanship, materials, and timing of the project indicate their involvement with the project.

4. Original Plans and Construction

The City Hall stands as it was originally constructed, with the exception of a one-story, two door brick garage added to the south facade between 1947 and 1950. Original plans and contracts have not been located. The construction was far enough along in 1893 for the Trustees to conduct the dedication ceremonies as the principal feature of the civic Fourth of July celebration. The open house and ceremony was climaxed at night by a banquet, speeches, and grand hall, according to the Las Vegas Optic.

5. Alterations and additions

A bronze plaque on the building states "City Hall, sponsored by City of Las Vegas, remodeled by Works Progress Administration, 1937." This

remodeling involved interior work only: the up-dating of office space.

A one-story brick two door garage was added to the south side of the City Hall sometime between 1947 and 1950. It is surprisingly non-obtrusive, carrying across the garage lines and colors of the original fire garage entry, which it flanks.

B. Historical Context

In April, 1891, the Town Trustees of the newly incorporated town of East Las Vegas purchased a lot from George W. Ward and called for a public referendum on an issue of municipal bonds amounting to \$7,000 for the building of a town hall. Plans by architects Kirchner and Kirchner were approved. Construction began in 1892 after the bond was boosted to \$10,000 and exterior work was completed in 1893. On into 1895 and 1896, the municipality, then incorporated as a City, continued to pay more bills for completion of work on parts of the interior.

In 1893, when the fire station in the new building was ready, the two volunteer fire companies of Las Vegas moved in their hand-pulled hose cart and hook and ladder cart. The two companies were combined when the city acquired a Seagram hose and chemical wagon in 1899. The fire department lacked horses then: the first team driven to the station by a volunteer in response to an alarm was quickly hitched to the fire wagon. In 1902 the city purchased a team, which required the employment of drivers and the purchase of feed and harness for the horses. In 1916, the city and volunteer company acquired a La France fire truck.

Because the governing body could get by with only the council chamber upstairs and offices for clerk, police chief, and a few employees, that body generously made available space badly needed for other services. In 1893, the trustees granted the Women's Christian Temperance Union use of a corner room on the first floor as a semi-public reading room, which continued there until the Carnegie Library was ready for occupancy in 1904.

Moreover, the public schools of Las Vegas were enjoying such a remarkable growth in 1890's that District Number Two in East Las Vegas lacked adequate facilities. The town trustees, therefore, rented rooms upstairs to the school board for use by the eighth grade class and the public high school. That high school graduated its first and only class of eight girls and one boy, in 1898, and then the school board contracted with the newly opened Normal University for the offering of the studies of the public high school until Castle High School was ready in 1903.

The principal city offices, those of the clerk and police chief, were located on the ground floor from the beginning. The police and fire offices

remain today, while other city offices moved out in 1964 in order to occupy the current City Hall.

Part II: Architectural Information

A. Description of Exterior

The two-story, load-bearing limestone building, three bays across the front, is topped by a hipped roof with wood brackets. A hipped roof square central tower with ribbons of arched window openings supported by columns raises the middle bay to three stories, emphasizing the entry. Three large semi-circular arched openings on the main facade serve from north to south respectively as a window, the main pedestrian entry, and the fire engine entry. An estimated eight original chimneys (5 of them visible in an old photograph--four on the north facade and probably four on the south facade) have been removed.

A straight-forward, nearly square, structure--the symmetry of the plan emphasized by the central tower--it is enhanced by the hewn stone used in its construction. Purple limestone trim frames the fenestration and distinguishes the quoins; the darker stone is also scattered throughout the light stone selected as the main material. Two eagles, carved in place, flank the central entry.

B. Description of the Interior

The interior of the City Hall was remodeled in 1937 under the auspices of the Works Progress Administrator, and now resembles the construction of that period. The original central hallway, which ran the length of the building, was filled in at the center with a new office space. Original wood work was replaced by simple painted wood framing, and larger spaces made smaller through the use of light wood partitions. A rear staircase with elaborate hardwood newel post and turned bannisters seems to be the only remnant of the pre-1937 interior, aside from the south section of the building which continues its original function as a fire truck garage.

At this time, no interior photographs and/or plans from the early period have been located.

C. Site

The property faces west onto 6th Street in an established late 19th/early 20th century commercial district in Las Vegas. The property is set-back from a broad sidewalk with wide curb cuts for fire engine access.

With the exception of two shrubs which flank the front windows, the site is not landscaped. A National Register district nomination is being prepared for the Old City Hall area. The Hall itself is listed on the State Register of Cultural Properties.

Part III. Sources of Information

A. Architectural Drawings. Not available.

B. Early views. - Photograph in New Mexico, Its Resources, Climate, Geography, Geology, History, Statistics, Present Condition and Future Prospects. Published by N.M. Territory Bureau of Immigration, 1894. Edited by Max Frost. Available at Museum of New Mexico History Library, Santa Fe.

- Undated early photograph, Photo Archives, Museum of New Mexico, Santa Fe.

C. Bibliography:

1. Primary Sources

Pen and Sunlight Sketches of St. Louis; The Commercial Gateway to the South. Chicago: Phoenix Publishing Co., (c. 1891).

The Old City Hall, unpublished paper by Lynn I. Perrigo, Emeritus Professor of History, New Mexico Highlands University, 1974 Available at State Historic Preservation Bureau, Santa Fe.

Sources cited in Prof. Perrigo's paper include the following:

Minutes, Town Trustees, 1888 - 1894, and City Council, 1895 - 1903 (City Manager's Office) passim.

Las Vegas Daily Optic, passim. 1888 - 1903.

Claude E. Johnson, The Municipal Government of the City of Las Vegas for the Year 1909 (N.M.H.U. thesis 1935).

Myrtle McMillan, History of the Growth of Education in Las Vegas (N.M.H.U., thesis, 1935).

Kenneth L. Strate, History of the E. Romero Hose and Fire Company, in History Seminar Papers: Papers on Local History (Bound mss., both local libraries, 1961).

George T. Gould, Illustrated Las Vegas (Las Vegas, 1903).

New Mexico Bureau of Immigration, San Miguel County (Santa Fe, 1907).

D. Likely Sources Not Yet Investigated:

Architectural records of the Denver Office of Kirchner and Kirchner

E. Supplemental Material

Copy of Pen and Sunlight Sketches of St. Louis, p. 219

Photographs and negatives dated August, 1982 by Betsy Swanson, on contract with Historic Preservation Bureau.

Prepared by

Kathleen Brooker

Deputy State Historic Preservation Officer

Historic Preservation Bureau

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